



Luther Burbank - "The Wizard of Horticulture"



Luther Burbank ([March 7, 1849](#) – [April 11, 1926](#)) ^[1] was an American [botanist](#), [horticulturist](#) and a pioneer in [agricultural science](#).

He developed more than 800 [strains](#) and [varieties](#) of [plants](#) over his 55-year career. Burbank's varied creations included [fruits](#), [flowers](#), [grains](#), [grasses](#), and [vegetables](#). He developed a spineless [cactus](#) (useful for [cattle-feed](#)) and the [plumcot](#).

Burbank's most successful strains and varieties include the [Shasta daisy](#), the [Fire poppy](#), the [July Elberta peach](#), the [Santa Rosa plum](#), the [Flaming Gold nectarine](#), the [Wickson plum](#), the [Freestone peach](#), and the [Burbank potato](#). Burbank also bred the [white blackberry](#). A natural sport (genetic variant) of the Burbank potato with russet (reddish-brown) skin later became known as the Russet Burbank potato: this large, brown-skinned, white-fleshed potato has become the world's predominant processing potato.

Born in [Lancaster, Massachusetts](#), Burbank grew up on a farm and received only an elementary education. The thirteenth of 18 children, he enjoyed the plants in his mother's

large garden. His father died when he was 21 years old, and Burbank used his small inheritance to buy a 17-acre (69,000 m²) plot of land near [Lunenburg](#).

Burbank developed the Burbank potato, [1872](#) to [1874](#). Burbank sold the rights to the Burbank potato for \$150 and used the money to travel to [Santa Rosa, California](#) in [1875](#). Later, a natural sport of Burbank potato with russeted skin was selected and named [Russet Burbank potato](#). Today, the Russet Burbank potato is the most widely cultivated potato in the [United States](#), prized for processing. [McDonald's french fries](#) are made exclusively from this cultivar.

In Santa Rosa, Burbank purchased a 4-acre plot of land, and established a [greenhouse](#), [nursery](#), and experimental fields that he used to conduct [crossbreeding](#) experiments on plants, inspired by [Charles Darwin's](#) *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*. (This site is now open to the public as a city park, [Luther Burbank Home and Gardens](#).) Later he purchased an 18-acre plot of land in the nearby town of [Sebastopol](#) for more experimental growing called [Gold Ridge Farm](#).^[2]

Burbank's creations included:

Fruits

- 113 [plums](#) and [prunes](#)
- 35 fruiting [cacti](#)
- 16 [blackberries](#)
- 13 [raspberries](#)
- 11 [quinces](#)
- 11 [plumcots](#)
- Ten [cherries](#)
- Ten [strawberries](#)
- Ten [apples](#)
- Eight [peaches](#)
- Six [chestnuts](#)
- Five [nectarines](#)
- Four [grapes](#)
- Four [pears](#)
- Three [walnut](#)
- Two [figs](#)
- One [almond](#)



Russet Burbank potatoes

Grains, grasses, forage

- Nine types

Vegetables

- 26 types

Ornamentals

- 91 types

Burbank was criticized by scientists of his day because he did not keep the kind of careful records that are the norm in scientific research and because he was mainly interested in getting results rather than in basic research. [Jules Janick](#), Ph.D., Professor of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, [Purdue University](#), writing in the [World Book Encyclopedia](#), 2004 edition, says: "Burbank cannot be considered a scientist in the academic sense."

In [1893](#) Burbank published a descriptive catalog of some of his best varieties, entitled called *New Creations in Fruits and Flowers*.

In 1907, Burbank published an "essay on childrearing," called [*The Training of the Human Plant*](#). In it, he advocated improved treatment of children and [eugenic](#) practices such as keeping the unfit and first cousins from marrying.

During his career, Burbank wrote, or co-wrote, several books on his methods and results, including his eight-volume *How Plants Are Trained to Work for Man* ([1921](#)), *Harvest of the Years* (with [Wilbur Hall](#), [1927](#)), *Partner of Nature* ([1939](#)), and the 12-volume *Luther Burbank: His Methods and Discoveries and Their Practical Application*.



New Creations in Fruits and Flowers cover.

By all accounts, Burbank was a kindly man who wanted to help other people. He was very interested in education and gave money to the local schools. He married twice: to

Helen Coleman in 1880, which ended in divorce in 1896; and to Elizabeth Waters in 1916. He had no children.

Burbank also had a mystical, spiritual side. His friend and admirer [Paramahansa Yogananda](#) wrote in his *Autobiography of a Yogi*:

"His heart was fathomlessly deep, long acquainted with humility, patience, sacrifice. His little home amid the roses was austere simple; he knew the worthlessness of luxury, the joy of few possessions. The modesty with which he wore his scientific fame repeatedly reminded me of the trees that bend low with the burden of ripening fruits; it is the barren tree that lifts its head high in an empty boast." (Yogananda, 1946, p. 352)

In a speech given to the First [Congregational Church](#) of San Francisco in 1926 Burbank said:

"I love humanity, which has been a constant delight to me during all my seventy-seven years of life; and I love flowers, trees, animals, and all the works of Nature as they pass before us in time and space. What a joy life is when you have made a close working partnership with Nature, helping her to produce for the benefit of mankind new forms, colors, and perfumes in flowers which were never known before; fruits in form, size, and flavor never before seen on this globe; and grains of enormously increased productiveness, whose fat kernels are filled with more and better nourishment, a veritable storehouse of perfect food--new food for all the world's untold millions for all time to come."

In mid-March 1926, Burbank suffered a heart attack and became ill with [gastrointestinal](#) complications. He died on [April 11, 1926](#), aged 77, and is buried near the greenhouse at the [Luther Burbank Home and Gardens](#).

[[edit](#)] Legacy

Burbank's work spurred the passing of the [1930 Plant Patent Act](#) four years after his death. The legislation made it possible to patent new varieties of plants (excluding [tuber](#)-propagated plants). In supporting the legislation, [Thomas Edison](#) testified before [Congress](#) in support of the legislation and said that "This [bill] will, I feel sure, give us many Burbanks." The authorities issued Plant Patents #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #18, #41, #65, #66, #235, #266, #267, #269, #290, #291, and #1041 to Burbank posthumously.

In [1986](#), Burbank was inducted into the [National Inventors Hall of Fame](#). The [Luther Burbank Home and Gardens](#), in downtown Santa Rosa, are now designated as a [National Historic Landmark](#). [Luther Burbank's Gold Ridge Experiment Farm](#) is listed in the [National Register of Historic Places](#) a few miles west of Santa Rosa in the town of [Sebastopol, California](#).

The town of [Burbank, California](#), does not take its name from Burbank, but from the [Los Angeles](#) dentist [David Burbank](#); however, the horticulturist gave his name to:

- Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California

- Luther Burbank Elementary School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- Luther Burbank Middle School in Burbank
- The [Luther Burbank School District](#) in [San Jose](#)
- [Santa Rosa's](#) Luther Burbank Rose Parade and Festival
- Luther Burbank Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois.
- [Luther Burbank Elementary School](#) in [Santa Rosa, California](#).
- Santa Rosa used to have a performing arts center named after Burbank, but Wells Fargo bought naming rights for \$3.2 million in 2006 and renamed it.
- The Lancaster Middle School in [Lancaster, Massachusetts](#) was renamed to [Luther Burbank Middle School](#) in [2003](#)
- A middle school in [Los Angeles](#) named [Burbank Middle School](#) was also named after Burbank.
- Luther Burbank Elementary School in [Altadena, California](#)
- In [1931](#) the Boys Parental School located on [Mercer Island, Washington](#) changed its name to Luther Burbank School. The school continued to function until 1966. The land on which the school was built was bought by [King County](#) and converted into Luther Burbank Park.
- Burbank Elementary School in [Roxana, Illinois](#) was named after Burbank. It was built in 1936, and an addition was added in 1966. With declining enrollment, the school was closed in 1983 and sold to a local chiropractor.
- The standard [botanical author abbreviation](#) for Burbank consists simply of "Burbank".

[\[edit\]](#) References

1. [^](#) [Invent Now](#) | [Hall of Fame](#) | [Search](#) | [Inventor Profile](#)
 2. [^](#) [Gold Ridge Luther Burbank's Experiment Farm](#)
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